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Davis, Babbitt to Offer Broad Water Solutions

SACRAMENTO--Gov. Gray Davis and U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt are scheduled Friday to push forward a sweeping campaign to solve the state's most critical water problems.

The two will announce a plan that would raise Shasta Dam to expand the state's largest reservoir and give government biologists more money and clout to save endangered fish. While officials have made similar announcements in the past, none have sketched plans as detailed and realistic as these, government officials and interested parties agree.

The long-awaited draft plan, five years in the making, is the latest chapter in a joint state-federal campaign expected to cost tens of billions of dollars over the next 30 years to expand reservoirs and restore rivers. Each of the major projects, including those to be proposed Friday, would face years of environmental and legislative review.

The plan sets forth an unprecedented attempt to clean up and bolster the Northern California water supplies upon which much of the state's trillion-dollar economy depends--while at the same time making up for the environmental damage wrought by decades of some of the most drastic rerouting of rivers anywhere.

"This is a good framework we can move forward on and then work on details," said Timothy H. Quinn, deputy general manager of the Metropolitan Water District, wholesaler of water to 17 million people living from Ventura to San Diego counties.

Issued by a federal-state umbrella agency called CalFed, the plan targets the Delta, an aquatic maze that drains 40% of California's fresh water. Captured by giant pumps before it reaches San Francisco Bay and shipped hundreds of miles in canals, Delta water reaches 22 million people and 4 million acres of farmland.

Babbitt and Davis are expected to propose an "environmental water account" with enough to supply nearly 2 million residents a year to be used at the discretion of federal and state biologists charged with recovering populations of Chinook salmon, Delta smelt and splittail.

The water would be purchased from willing sellers such as Sacramento Valley irrigation districts with generous water rights. That water would then be used to guarantee that cities and farms dependent upon Delta water face no emergency cutbacks in supplies because of fish protections.

Other proposals in the plan include:

- * Raising Shasta Dam near Redding by 6 feet so that Shasta Lake can hold back enough additional water to supply 1.5 million people for a year.
- * Investing as much as \$4 billion in federal, state and local funds over the next seven years in water conservation and reclamation.
- * Buying as much as 35,000 acres of poorly drained San Joaquin Valley farmland and halting irrigation there to help clean streams that drain to the Delta.
- * Studying what kind of pumps, pipes and agreements would be necessary to allow Southern California water districts to exchange some of their Delta water supplies for cleaner Sierra runoff used by southern San Joaquin Valley farmers.
- * Building mini-reservoirs on the eroded, bowl-like islands of the delta to store winter flood flows that could be released in drier times.

Babbitt and Davis also are expected to call for greater study--not necessarily implementation--of several more controversial ideas.

These include the building of a new reservoir in the Sacramento Valley and construction of a short canal on the Sacramento River that would guarantee delivery of cleaner water to Southern California, which seeks the best-quality water possible from Northern California. This water is blended with supplies from the notoriously salty Colorado River, another major source of the imported water that sustains coastal cities in Southern California.

The plan still was being revised late Wednesday by top Davis and Babbitt advisors. One idea under debate is a "user fee" to fund environmental restoration that could mean slightly higher water bills for millions of Californians.

Business, urban and farm groups warned CalFed officials that such a fee without a connection to specific benefits would kill support for the plan.

The document set for release Friday does not legally bind the 14 federal and state agencies folded within CalFed. Instead, say those working on the plan, it is a summary of the direction CalFed intends to take in July when Babbitt and Davis, the leaders of the joint effort, choose among alternative plans described in federal and state environmental documents still being written.

"It's OK they're going forward and putting something out," said Tom Graff, senior attorney with the Environmental Defense Fund in Oakland. "What's legally significant is what comes out down the line."

Delta supplies have never been more critical nor more precarious, as California expects to add 15 million new residents by 2020 and the state is overdue for drought after six years of abundant rain and snow. The listing of several Delta fish under the U.S. Endangered Species Act in recent years has at the same time led to pumping restrictions that limit the delivery of Delta water to the Silicon Valley, San Joaquin Valley farms and Southern California cities.

Banking on the idea that healthier fish populations would mean fewer cuts in water supply, CalFed has earmarked \$1 billion in state bond money, federal appropriations and water user fees to spend on restoring Central Valley rivers. Since its launch in 1995, the super-bureaucracy has already funded 195 different projects--from the removal of small dams to the installation of fish screens--worth \$228 million.

Farmers have long complained that CalFed emphasizes environmental restoration over the expanded water supply that they see as critical, but Wednesday some agricultural representatives familiar with the latest CalFed blueprint found reason for hope.

"There's a lot of good stuff in there," said Jason Peltier, manager of the Central Valley Project Water Assn., which represents thousands of farmers who buy water from the nation's largest irrigation project, based in the delta. "It's definitely a step forward. On its face, it's not neatly balanced, but there's a promise of balance."